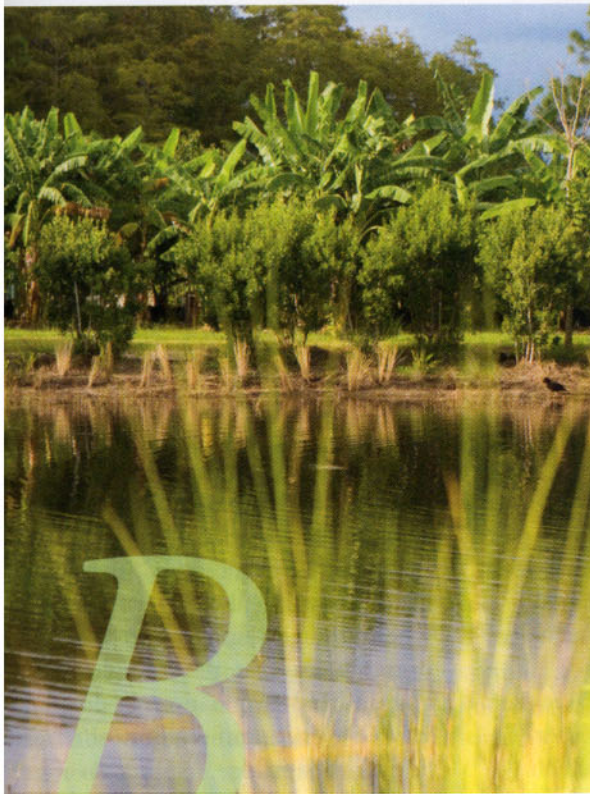




Bloom *On*

How Brian Holley and his dream team of landscape artists have made the Naples Botanical Garden into a world-class delight. **BY KRISTY KIERNAN** PHOTOGRAPHY BY KAREN T. BARTLETT



BRIAN HOLLEY IS A MAN WHO WEARS MANY HATS. HE'S A FUNDRAISER, DIPLOMAT, taskmaster and mentor, but he looks most like a worker, a man born to don a hardhat. Once he settles it on his head—preparing to escort me through the most extraordinary construction site in Naples—everything about him is solid, purposeful and in charge. He's the kind of man who gets things done.

And that is a very good thing, indeed, because as the executive director of the Naples Botanical Garden, he has a lot of things to get done. The result of more than 15 years of planning by dedicated Neapolitans, the garden is one of the most complex and ambitious cultural project Naples has seen to date. It's expertly coming together on 170 acres off Bayshore Drive, and Holley is

Natural wonders:
Opposite, the brilliant pink bloom of a Mandevilla in the Brazilian Garden. (Clockwise from top left) The tree house in the Children's Garden; a mural and waterfall in the Brazilian Garden; Executive Director Brian Holley; Harvey's Lake near the Children's Garden.

the go-to guy responsible for making it all happen on time and on budget.

He flips rapidly through boards of colorful artist renderings and architect plans before we leave the war room, giving me a preview of what we're about to see, explaining the "Gardens with Latitude" theme. The band around the earth between 26 latitude north and 26 latitude south is filled with some of the world's most beautiful tropical ecosystems—including Naples. Comprising the parts of Brazil, the Caribbean and Asia that also fall within this band was an exciting way to acknowledge our sister gardens around the world.

"Have you heard of Raymond Jungles?" he asks, pushing an impressive hardcover book on Jungles' work across the table at me before showing me another board. "This is going to be a big statement, the Brazilian Garden. What about Ellin Goetz? She's local. The Florida Garden, another big statement, but more subtle. She alludes to the patterns she sees in the landscape of Florida itself."

AS HE CONTINUES THROUGH the other world-renowned landscape architects whose visions make up the five gardens—Robert Truskowski of Laguna Beach is responsible for the Caribbean Garden, Made Wijaya of Bali is creating the Asian Garden, and Herb Schall of Fort Collins is the mastermind behind the Children's Garden—he adds another metaphorical hat, that of astute reader of human nature.

His descriptions of the landscape architects and their visions are filled with the sort of insight normally reserved for lifelong friends, or even family members.

"Bob Truskowski, he's got this intellectual thing going, he wants to show the history of the Caribbean, the influences of other countries on their landscape," he says. "And Herb—the Children's Garden is going to be these jewel boxes of perfection. Kids really respond to



perfection, everything just so, but on their scale."

Holley hands me my own hardhat as we climb into the spiffy electric car he uses to get around the grounds, and we're off.

We pass the Florida Gulf Coast University building, the Center for Education and Research, which houses classrooms, labs, conference rooms and an auditorium, and, as we swing around the first lake, I'm taking copious notes, fascinated by the insider construction tidbits Holley is feeding me.

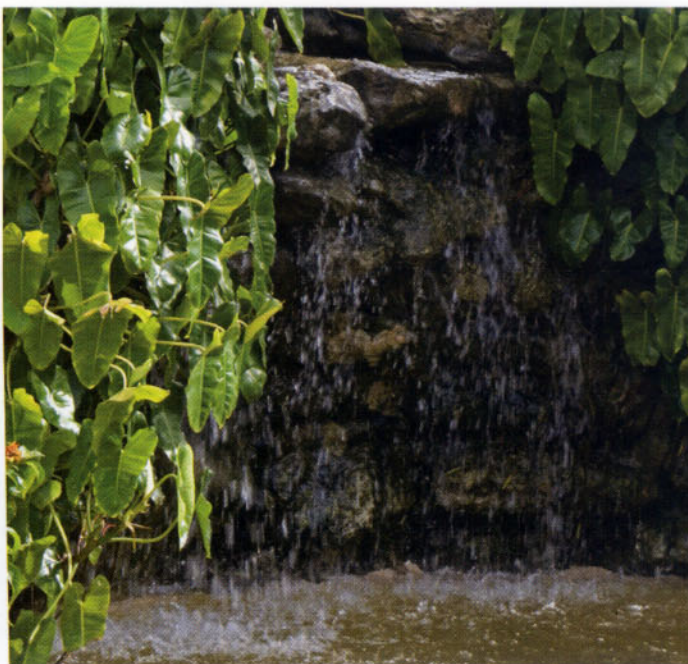
It's all great information, presented eloquently, but it proves difficult to digest when the gardens open up before us, and I get my first stunning

glimpse of what we've been chatting about all morning.

We start in the Vicky C. and David Byron Smith Children's Garden, where strangler figs support the kind of tree house that glows bright and gold in kids' imaginations at the start of every summer. From the tree house's rope bridge, I spot a cave with a water curtain spilling over the entrance, and the adult in me begins to fade to shadow.

Holley smiles at my delighted grin. "You can't help it," he agrees, and points to the water cave. "I saw one of those in a movie when I was a kid and always wanted to build one."

And that's exactly what the Children's Garden is about; making childhood fantasies reality.



Florida charm: Opposite, landscape architect Ellin Goetz in the Florida Garden. Left, the Cracker House in the Children's Garden; and Wyn's Falls, named in honor of volunteer Wyn Turner.

"The Children's Garden is about making childhood fantasies reality."

There's a perfectly scaled "Cracker" house and garden, and Holley shifts seamlessly from building water caves to debating the etymology of "cracker" with me, before devolving into potty humor ... literally. In the "found objects" garden, toilets are being converted to planters, along with bathtubs and coffee cans.

If you have that rare child who's able to resist a toilet full of flowers, there's a "crawl net" over shallows, lychee trees, red mangroves, canna lilies, water pumps, a fascinating variegated lemon tree, and the butterfly house is sure to be a favorite. There is no water running through the shallows yet, or I would be sorely tempted to get on my hands and knees and play. It might not be finished, but there is a carefree feel in the air already.

As we make our way toward the Brazilian Garden, we stop to admire Chuck. Chuck's quiet today, trying to conserve his strength. He's going to be a showstopper eventually, and showstoppers take a lot of energy. Chuck is a Royal Poinciana, named after Charles Berger, board chairman,

who passed away in December 2008. But this is no morose memorial; this is a fitting tribute with a sense of humor. Berger—credited with leading the initial fundraising campaign that brought in \$32 million—was well known for his playful striped socks, and eventually Chuck will sport colorful bands around his trunk in Berger's honor.

Another tree, a gumbo limbo, sends a concerned look across Holley's face.

"See that?" he asks. "We had to transport it in five pieces, and it didn't make it. We tried our best. We consulted arborists from around the country and finally had to cut the rotted root ball off altogether."

His voice is sad, as if relating a favored relative's demise.

"So, why's it here?" I ask.

"After talking to the arborists, we all figured it couldn't hurt," he says. "That is quite possibly the largest cutting in the world. We hope it works."

Holley points out more trees, a yellow Poinciana found off Oil Well Road, carnauba wax palms, a black pudding fruit tree from Brazil, 40 oil palms moved from Old Naples, a jac-

aranda and a coffee tree. He knows the history of every one of them, as if they were his children, and I'm surprised to find that so many came from Southwest Florida.

"Rough estimate?" he says. "We probably got 25 percent of the trees locally."

"But how?" I ask. "Did you just wander around until you found a great tree and then ring the doorbell to ask if you could take it?"

He laughs, his hardhat tilting back precariously. "Word gets around. People want to clear land for houses and the builder calls us, the landscapers know about us, the county."

OPENING EVENTS

Nov. 10 Opening Celebration*

Nov. 11 Hats in the Garden annual luncheon and fashion show*

Nov. 13 Royal Palm Society and Member Preview*

Nov. 14-15 Public grand opening weekend. Ribbon cutting 11 a.m. Saturday. Adults \$9.95, children (four to 14) \$4.95, under three free

* Ticketed event: Call Lisa Juliano for information. (239) 643-7275

*"I turn slowly, savoring the view.
The romance of it all overtakes me."*

Add professional networker to his list of job functions.

The Brazilian Garden, designed by Ray Jungles of Miami is the first of the "Gardens with Latitude" we explore. Brazil, one of the most ecologically diverse systems on the planet was a natural place to start, and was the home of the "father of modern landscape architecture," Roberto Burle Marx. In an extraordinarily generous gesture, Jungles, a designer and former student of Marx, donated one of Marx's massive ceramic murals—the only one of its kind in the United States—to be the centerpiece of the Brazilian Garden.

A waterfall in front of the mural will cascade down to a pond containing massive Amazon water lilies, and surrounding it all will be kapok trees and a stunning array of bromeliads and orchids. As I stand in front of the structure that will eventually house the mural, I realize that we are at a high point in the garden. I turn slowly, savoring the view, imagining the water running, the mural glowing in a setting sun, live musicians and all the orchids in bloom. The romance of it all overtakes me.

"You know, every woman in Naples is going to want to get married right here," I say.

Holley laughs. "We're doing that," he says. "Might be a little wet here for it, though."

AS WE HEAD OVER THE bridge to the Caribbean Garden, I spot a small orchid directly in our path, as if it's thrown itself here, knowing help would be by soon. Holley hits the brakes, and we examine it before he carefully stores it in the cart so that it can be returned to the safety of a treetop. Nothing is wasted here, nothing taken for granted.

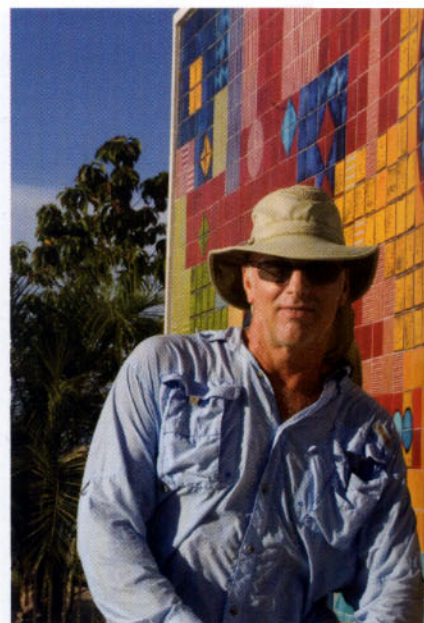
In fact, sustainability is the main point around which our conversation revolves. Holley might not be a 25-year-old upstart, but his excitement at the green aspect of this project is palpable, and he talks about going for the LEED Gold designation the way a pro football player might talk about the Super Bowl.

It's an apt enough comparison. LEED, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System, is the globally recognized standard in green building and design, and the Botanical Garden is hoping to be one of only three LEED-certified projects in Naples. (The Children's Museum of Naples is working toward certification, and the Edison College Childcare Center has achieved a Gold designation.)

Consisting of a rating system in six categories—sustainable sites, water efficiency, energy and atmosphere, materials and resources, indoor environmental quality, and innovation and design process—LEED certification is a massive undertaking and a lofty goal, but one that Holley is determined to achieve.

An 18,000-gallon cistern will collect rainwater for irrigation, more than 75 percent of construction materials will be recycled, solar power will be utilized as much as possible, buildings will be energy efficient, and the parking lots will feature "bioswales" filled with native plants and porous paving in order to collect more rainwater. Yes, even the parking lots are green.

I'm paying attention as Holley points out the coral stone pillars in the Kathleen and Scott Kapnick Caribbean Garden, but there are larger things dawning on me. I realize that the Naples Botanical Garden is, planned or not, going to be the most well-rounded representation of every



demographic in Naples in a way never achieved before. Whether we admit it or not, Naples is a restless community searching for balance. Our various groups have been grasping for ways to coexist, and in this enormous, world-class project all are represented.

When I stop Holley in the middle of his description of the Caribbean chattel house to explain my theory, he squints at me.

"I hadn't really thought about it like that before," he says. "But I could see that, sure. We'll be having cultural events, art shows, live music; we're teaming up with the schools to provide plant-packs that kids will use to learn about gardening and Florida's agriculture, and they're going to be available in Spanish and Haitian. We're green, but we're also promoting Florida's history."

IN THE KAREN AND ROBERT SCOTT Florida Garden, designed by local award-winning landscape architect Ellin Goetz, we see some of that history. Having lived in Southwest Florida for almost 40 years, I've been waiting for this since the start of our tour.

Sabal palms—Florida's official state tree—bougainvillea and silver palmetto circumscribe a Great Circle, which contains the First American Garden, a tribute to the Calusa,



Laid-back latitude: Opposite, Brazilian Garden Designer Ray Jungles. Left, the James and Linda White birding tower overlooks 90 acres of restored wetlands.

Seminole and Miccosukee cultures. The Contemplative Garden, groves of citrus and flowering trees, celebrates Florida's long agricultural history, and the Idea Garden promotes the uses of native flowers and plants for home gardens.

I am transported back to my childhood. Soon the sweetness of orange blossoms will permeate the air, an intoxicating scent I haven't encountered in almost 15 years ... save the perfume counter at Nordstrom.

We pass through the Buehler Family Foundation Enabling Garden, admire the site of the Jeannie and Christopher B. Smith labyrinth, and enter the Solstice Garden, which overlooks one of the three lakes, before we cross a bridge to the James and Linda White birding tower. It overlooks the 90-acre restored Collier Enterprises South Wetland, where the natural wildness of Florida itself is captured.

The noise of construction fades away and, native or newcomer, one cannot help but feel a deep sense of peace, of wanting to belong to this place. This is what the old-timers

remember; this is what the transplants need to see; this is what the children need to experience to gain a true understanding of the essence of Florida.

More than 21 acres of invasive melaleuca have been eradicated—shredded and used for mulch—along with other non-native species such as hybrid cattails, downy rose myrtle and Brazilian pepper. The magnificent view that has opened up is of cypress and marshes, towering pines and gnarled mangroves.

We speak quietly, reverently here, and we're rewarded with the sight of snowy egrets, and a flock of ibis winging over our heads. It is a place that encourages personal exchanges, and I turn my attention back to Holley, the man responsible for pulling it all together.

"So when all this is finished," I pry, "will you stay?" I can't imagine anyone saying no, not out here.

He takes his time answering, his hands spread possessively across the wood railing, and squints at me again.

"I could see that," he says. "I go out to 'Ding' Darling on Sanibel; I go to the Fakahatchee Strand, Corkscrew. Every weekend is like vacation here. It's a good place."

It is, indeed, a good place. And soon Southwest Florida will have its own world-class ecological cultural destination to add to the list. When people come to visit from all over the world, and when they decide to stay, they will likely cite the Naples Botanical Garden as one of the reasons. 🌿

ONGOING EVENTS

(Beginning February 2010)

First Call Fridays 5:15 p.m., first Friday of the month. Live music, wine and appetizers.

Second Saturday Celebrations 10 a.m., second Saturday of the month. Various family activities, sandwiches and sides.

Third Sunday Brunches 11:30 a.m., third Sunday of the month. Relaxing music, brunch.

Fourth Wednesday Food Features 5:15 p.m., fourth Wednesday of the month. Local chef demonstrations.